DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 462 141 PS 030 025

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TITLE Homicides of Children and Youth. Crimes against Children Series. Juvenile Justice Bulletin.
INSTITUTION Department of Justice, Washington, DC. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
REPORT NO NCJ-187239
PUB DATE 2001-10-00
NOTE 14p.
CONTRACT 98-JN-FX-0012
AVAILABLE FROM Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, Publication Reprint/Feedback, P.O. Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20849-6000. Tel: 800-638-8736 (Toll Free); Fax: 301-519-5600; e-mail: askncjrs@ncjrs.org.
PUB TYPE Numerical/Quantitative Data (110) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Children; Crime; *Homicide; Incidence; Juvenile Justice; Trend Analysis; *Victims of Crime; Youth Problems
IDENTIFIERS Juvenile Crime

ABSTRACT

This bulletin, part of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's "Crimes against Children Series," draws on FBI and other data to provide a statistical portrait of juvenile homicide victimization, asserting that homicide is the only major cause of childhood deaths that has increased over the past 3 decades. The bulletin offers detailed information about overall patterns and victim age groups for homicides of children and youth. Specific types of juvenile homicide victimization are discussed in further detail, including maltreatment homicides, abduction homicides, and school homicides. Finally, initiatives designed to prevent homicides of children and youth are explored. (Contains 21 references.) (EV)

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Crimes against Children Series

Homicides of Children and Youth. Juvenile Justice Bulletin.

by David Finkelhor and Richard Ormrod

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs

October 2001

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U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

OJJDP

October 2001

JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

Homicides of Children and Youth

David Finkelhor and Richard Ormrod

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) is committed to improving the justice system's response to crimes against children. OJJDP recognizes that children are at increased risk for crime victimization. Not only are children the victims of many of the same crimes that victimize adults, they are subject to other crimes, like child abuse and neglect, that are specific to childhood. The impact of these crimes on young victims can be devastating, and the violent or sexual victimization of children can often lead to an intergenerational cycle of violence and abuse. The purpose of OJJDP's Crimes Against Children Series is to improve and expand the Nation's efforts to better serve child victims by presenting the latest information about child victimization, including analyses of crime victimization statistics, studies of child victims and their special needs, and descriptions of programs and approaches that address these needs.

Murders of children and youth, the ultimate form of juvenile victimization, have received a great deal of deserved publicity in recent years.[1] Yet, while images of Polly Klaas and student victims at Columbine High School are vivid in the public's mind, statistics on juvenile murder victims are not. Substantial misunderstandings exist about the magnitude of and trends in juvenile homicide and the types of children at risk of becoming victims of different types of homicide.

This Bulletin gives a brief statistical portrait of various facets of child and youth homicide victimization in the United States. It draws heavily on homicide data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHRs), which are part of the Bureau's Uniform Crime Reporting Program; however, it also relies on a variety of other studies and statistical sources.

Highlights of the findings presented in this Bulletin include the following:

- In 1999, about 1,800 juveniles (a rate of 3.0 per 100,000) were victims of homicide in the United States. This rate is substantially higher than that of any other developed country.
- Homicides of juveniles in the United States are unevenly distributed, both geographically and demographically. Rates are substantially higher for African American juveniles and for juveniles in certain jurisdictions. Yet, 85 percent of all U.S. counties had no homicides of juveniles in 1997.
- Homicides of young children (age 5 and younger), children in middle childhood

[1] Strictly speaking, murder and homicide are not identical; however, in this Bulletin the terms are sometimes used interchangeably to improve readability.

A Message From OJJDP

Homicides are always tragic, but our sympathies are heightened when the victim is a young child or adolescent. Thus, the deaths of juveniles raise understandable public concerns.

Unfortunately, research statistics seldom claim the broad audience of the morning newspaper or the evening news. This Bulletin, part of OJJDP's Crimes Against Children Series, draws on FBI and other data to provide a statistical portrait of juvenile homicide victimization.

Homicide is the only major cause of childhood deaths that has increased over the past three decades. In 1999, some 1,800 juveniles, or 3 per 100,000 of the U.S. juvenile population, were homicide victims—a rate substantially higher than those of other developed countries. At the same time, murders of juveniles are infrequent in many areas of our country. In 1997, 85 percent of U.S. counties had no homicides of juveniles.

The Bulletin offers detailed information about overall patterns and victim age groups. Specific types of juvenile homicide victimization are discussed in further detail, including maltreatment homicides, abduction homicides, and school homicides.

Finally, initiatives designed to prevent homicides of children and youth (juveniles) are explored. Given the unacceptable rate of such crimes, much remains to be done.

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(ages 6 to 11), and teenagers (ages 12 to 17)[2] differ on a number of dimensions, suggesting that they should be analyzed separately.

- Most homicides of young children are committed by family members through beatings or suffocation. Although victims include approximately equal numbers of boys and girls, offenders include a disproportionate number of women. Homicides of young children may be seriously undercounted.
- Middle childhood is a time when a child's homicide risk is relatively low. Homicides of children in middle childhood show a mixed pattern. Some result from child maltreatment and others from the use of firearms. Some are sexually motivated, and some are committed as part of multiple-victim family homicides.
- Homicides of teenagers, most of which involve male victims killed by male offenders using firearms, rose dramatically in the late 1980s and early 1990s but have declined sharply since 1993.

Overall Patterns

Overall, the statistics on murders of juveniles in the United States are grim and alarming. According to FBI data, 1,789 persons under 18 were victims of homicide in 1999 (Fox and Zawitz, 2001). That number—equal to a rate of 3.0 per 100,000 juveniles or more than 5 juveniles per day—makes the United States first among developed countries in homicides of juveniles (Krug, Dahlberg, and Powell, 1996). In fact, the U.S. rate is 5 times higher than the rate of the other 25 developed countries combined and nearly double the rate of the country with the next highest rate. The rate at which juveniles are murdered in the United States is related to the Nation's high overall homicide rate: 5.7 per 100,000 in 1999, 3 times higher than the overall rate of any other developed country (Fox and Zawitz, 2001).

Homicide is the only major cause of childhood death that has increased in incidence during the past 30 years. While deaths of children resulting from accidents, congenital defects, and infectious diseases were falling, homicides of children were increasing. Homicide is now ranked second or third, depending on the specific age group, among the 3 leading causes of childhood mortality, accounting for 1 out of 23 deaths of children and youth younger than 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). More children 0–4 years of age in the United States now die from homicide than from infectious diseases or cancer, and homicide claims the lives of more teenagers in the United States than any cause other than accidents (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). Since 1993, however, homicides of juveniles have joined the downward trend in homicides of adults that began in 1991 (figure 1).

Juvenile homicide is one of the most unevenly distributed forms of child victimization. Certain groups and localities experience the overwhelming brunt of the problem.

Minority children and youth are disproportionately affected. For example, 52 percent of juvenile victims of homicide are nonwhite (Snyder and Finnegan, 1998). Even after a recent decline, the overall rate of victimization for black juveniles (9.1 per 100,000) in 1997 dwarfed the rate for white juveniles (1.8 per 100,000) (figure 2). The victimization rate for Hispanic juveniles in three States where data are available was also quite high in 1997 (5.0 per 100,000).[3]

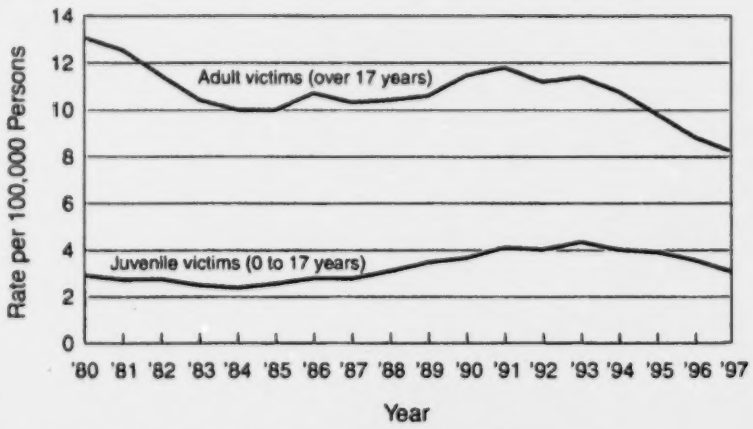
The uneven distribution is also geographic. Some States have no juvenile homicides, and some have rates that are twice the national average (table 1). Homicides of juveniles are much more common in large urban areas than in rural and smaller urban areas. In 1997, 85 percent of all U.S. counties did not have a single homicide of a juvenile, while five highly urban counties (Chicago, IL; Detroit, MI; Los Angeles, CA; New York, NY; and Philadelphia, PA) accounted for one-fourth of all such victimizations nationwide (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999).

Geographic areas can be differentiated not only by the rate at which juveniles are the victims of homicide but also by the percentage of all homicides in the area that involve a juvenile victim (see figure 3). Thus, in some States with a low rate of juvenile victim homicides, such as New Hampshire and some other New England States, juveniles actually constitute an above-average percentage (more than 20 percent) of all homicide victims in the State. However, in other low-rate States, such as West Virginia, juveniles represent less than 10 percent of all homicide victims. The grim combination of a high rate of juvenile victim homicides and a high

[2] See discussion of victim age groups on page 3.

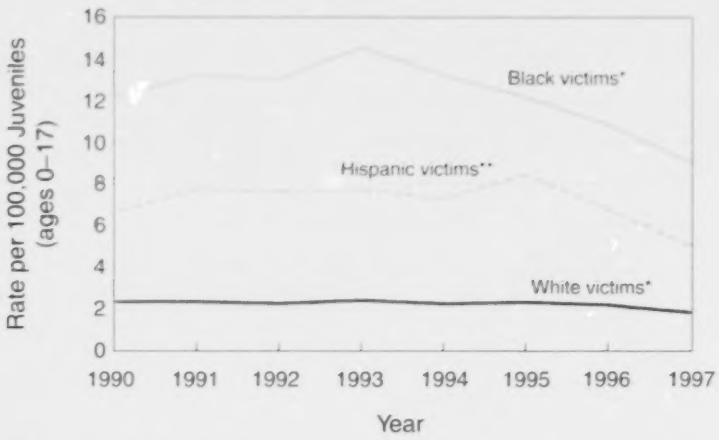
[3] Homicide rates for Hispanic youth are based on data from Arizona, California, and Texas—States that regularly report information on victim ethnicity (this item is optional for the SHRs). Because of this limited reporting, the rates should not be considered nationally representative. Furthermore, the location of the three reporting States suggests the data are more likely to be typical of juvenile victims of Mexican-American background than of those of other Hispanic origin.

Figure 1: Homicide Rates for Juvenile and Adult Victims, 1980–97



Note: Rates were calculated by the Crimes against Children Research Center.
Source: Snyder and Finnegan, 1998.

Figure 2: Juvenile Victim Homicide Rates, by Victim Race and Ethnicity, 1990–97



Note: Rates were calculated by the Crimes against Children Research Center.

* Includes Hispanics within race.

** Three reporting States (Arizona, California, and Texas) only (see footnote 3, page 2); includes Hispanics of any race.

Source: Homicide data for white victims and black victims from Snyder and Finnegan, 1998. Homicide data for Hispanic victims from Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997.

percentage of juveniles among a State's homicide victims occurs in 11 States—including California, Illinois, and Pennsylvania, which contain 3 of the 5 large cities identified above.

Such a broad summary of statistics on homicides involving juvenile victims is somewhat misleading in that it masks the multifaceted nature of the problem. Homicides of children and youth can take many different forms, each of which involves different contributing factors and calls for different prevention strategies. A victim's age is one important distinction. The relative risk and characteristics of homicide victimization differ for juveniles of different ages. Homicides of children and youth can also be distinguished by characteristics of the perpetrator and certain contextual factors. This Bulletin explores different facets of homicides of juveniles, starting with important differences based on the age of the victim. The following age groups are discussed in order of decreasing risk: teenagers, young children, and children in middle childhood. The Bulletin also briefly describes what is known about particular types of homicides—such as child maltreatment homicides and school homicides—that have been the focus of recent public concern. The Bulletin ends with a discussion of policy initiatives that focus on preventing the homicide of juveniles.

Victim Age Groups

Teenagers

The murder of teenagers has received substantial publicity in recent years, in part because of the rising number of teenage victims between 1984 and 1993. The number of homicides involving teenage victims increased nearly 158 percent during that time (figure 4) and by 1993 reached a rate 29 percent higher than the Nation's overall rate (Fox and Zawitz, 2001). Even after declining from 1993 to 1997, the homicide rate for teenagers remained about 10 percent higher than the average homicide rate for all persons (Fox and Zawitz, 2001).

The term "teenager," as used in this Bulletin, refers to youth ages 12 to 17. Age 12 is the most useful point of demarcation for examining homicide patterns and trends across childhood because it is the age at which rates begin to rise significantly (see figure 5). It is also the age above which the marked increase in the rate at which juveniles are murdered occurred in the late 1980s (see figure 4).

Compared with homicides of children younger than 12, homicides of teenagers more closely resemble and appear to be an extension of homicides of adults. Like homicides of adults, homicides of teenagers overwhelmingly involve a male victim (81 percent) (figure 6) killed by a male

Table 1: Homicides of Juveniles: Average State Rates per 100,000 Juveniles Ages 0–17, 1996 and 1997

State	Rate	State	Rate	State	Rate
Nevada	6.2	Pennsylvania	2.9	Utah	1.9
Illinois	5.4	Texas	2.8	Oregon	1.9
Louisiana	5.4	Georgia	2.8	Vermont	1.7
Maryland	5.1	New York	2.8	Idaho	1.7
Alaska	5.0	North Carolina	2.7	Iowa	1.4
Mississippi	4.5	Connecticut	2.7	West Virginia	1.2
California	4.4	Ohio	2.6	Hawaii	1.2
New Mexico	3.9	Wisconsin	2.6	Massachusetts	1.1
Missouri	3.7	Alabama	2.6	Delaware	1.1
Tennessee	3.6	Indiana	2.6	Maine	1.0
Nebraska	3.6	Colorado	2.5	New Hampshire	1.0
Oklahoma	3.6	Florida	2.5	South Dakota	1.0
Arkansas	3.3	Kentucky	2.3	Wyoming	0.8
South Carolina	3.3	Rhode Island	2.3	Montana	0
Virginia	3.1	New Jersey	2.3	North Dakota	0
Arizona	3.0	Washington	2.3	Kansas	N/A
Michigan	3.0	Minnesota	2.0		

Note: Homicide rates were calculated by the Crimes against Children Research Center.

Source: Snyder and Finnegan, 1998.

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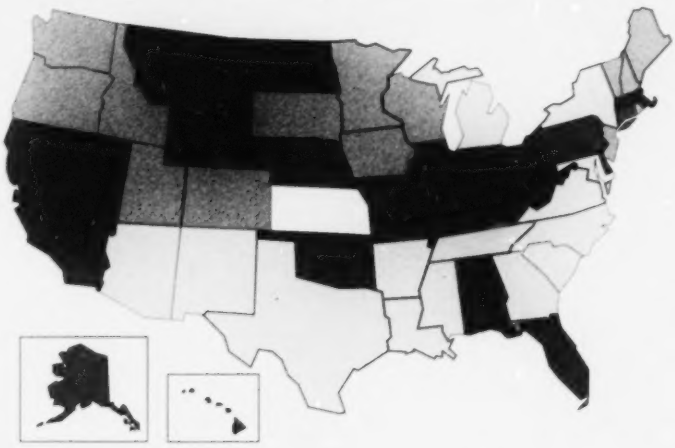
offender (95 percent) (no figure) using a firearm (86 percent) or a knife or other object (10 percent) (figure 7). Unlike homicides of children under age 12, relatively few homicides of teenagers (9 percent) are committed by family members (figure 8).[4] The percentage of homicide victims murdered by other youth is much larger for teenagers (figure 9) than for victims younger than 12. Nonetheless, two-thirds of teenage homicide victims are killed by adults. The murderers of teenagers are predominantly young (figure 9), but only a minority are younger than 18.

The dramatic increase in the number of teenagers murdered during the late 1980s and early 1990s has been attributed to various factors, including the rise in child poverty, expansion of gang activity, spread of crack cocaine and drug market competition, and increased availability of handguns. The growth in the number of homicides of teens from 1984 to 1993 was almost entirely in the category of firearm homicides, which accounted for 85 percent of all homicides of teenagers during that time (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999). Some of the increase in teens' gun use during that period may have been connected to the drug trade and a perceived need to protect valuable drugs and money. The cycle of gun use accelerated as additional youth acquired guns to protect themselves from other armed youth.

Although the number of teen homicide victims rose dramatically in the late 1980s, the increase was somewhat limited demographically and geographically, occurring primarily in certain parts of urban communities. Available data confirm that the increase did not affect all segments of the population equally. In particular, data show a disproportionate rise in the risk of homicide for minority teens. Although homicides of white teenagers almost doubled (up 92 percent) from 1984 to 1993, homicides of minority teens more than tripled during the same period (Snyder and Finnegan, 1998). The number of African American teens murdered during the period increased 233 percent (from 314 to 1,047), and the number of other minority teens (i.e., Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander) increased 275 percent (from 12 to 45). Rural areas were relatively unaffected by the increase in the rate of homicides of teens. Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, rates barely rose in towns with populations smaller than 25,000 while they more than doubled in cities with populations larger than 250,000.

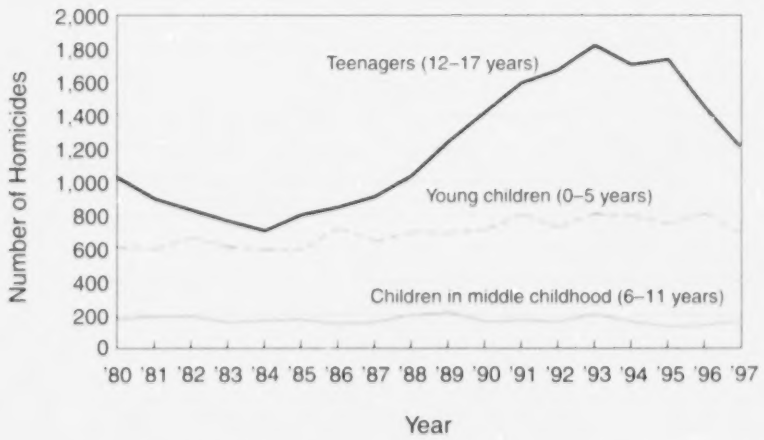
Figure 3: Juvenile Victim Homicide Rate and Juveniles as a Percentage of All Homicide Victims, by State, Average for 1996 and 1997



Note: "High" and "low" refer to rates or percentages that are above or below the national average.

Source: Snyder and Finnegan, 1998.

Figure 4: Homicides of Juveniles, by Victim Age Group, 1980–97

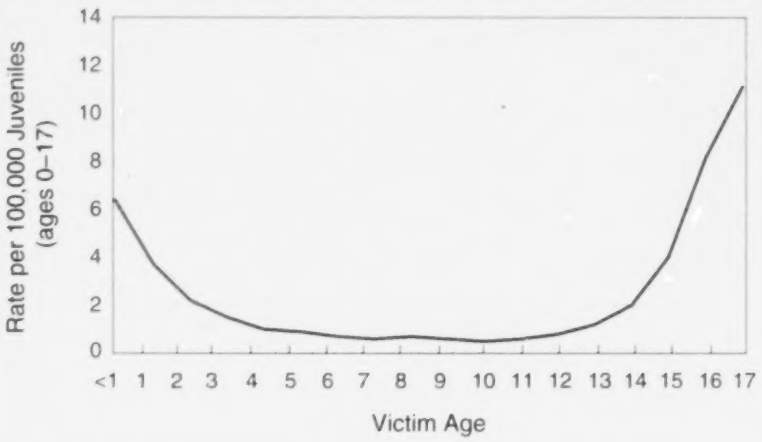


Note: The Crimes against Children Research Center adjusted the homicide data by age group.

Source: Snyder and Finnegan, 1998.

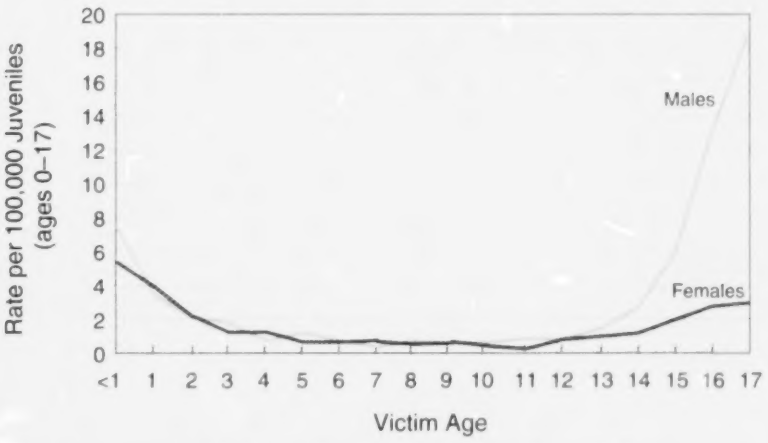
[4] This percentage is calculated for each juvenile victim age group rather than for all juvenile victims as shown in figures 7 and 8.

Figure 5: Juvenile Victim Homicide Rate, by Victim Age, 1997



Note: Rates were calculated by the Crimes against Children Research Center.
Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997.

Figure 6: Juvenile Victim Homicide Rate, by Victim Sex and Age, 1997



Note: Rates were calculated by the Crimes against Children Research Center.
Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997.

After peaking in 1993, the number of homicides of teenagers dropped markedly (34 percent) by 1997 (Snyder and Finnegan, 1998), although it remained above the low of the mid-1980s (figure 4). Decreases from the peak in 1993 until 1997 were similar for whites (33 percent), African Americans (39 percent), and Hispanics (40 percent),[5] meaning that the differential rates for these groups persisted. In disturbing contrast, however, the number of homicides of teens of other races (i.e., Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander) increased 51 percent during that period. Homicide statistics for 1997 show that gangs and drugs remained a part of many killings of teens (gangs in 29 percent and drugs in 6 percent of homicides) (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997). The role of firearms also remained important; during 1993 and 1997, more than 80 percent of homicides of teens involved the use of a firearm.

Young Children

Often eclipsed by the public's concern about the murder of teenagers is the fact that young children (i.e., those age 5 and younger)[6] face an elevated risk of homicide, although under different conditions. FBI data show 700 homicide victims under age 6 in 1997 (a rate of 2.6 per 100,000) (Snyder and Finnegan, 1998; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997). The homicide rate for young children was for many years equal to the rate for teens, before the latter's recent rise. In spite of that rise, more girls under age 6 were homicide victims than girls ages 12 to 17 (320 versus 230) and white children under age 6 were victims of homicide 75 percent as often as white teens (1.8 per 100,000 and 2.4 per 100,000, respectively) in 1997 (figure 10).

Moreover, the actual homicide rate for young children may be even higher than available official statistics suggest. The homicides of young children are among the most difficult to document because they so often resemble deaths resulting from accidents and other causes. For example, a child who dies from SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome) is difficult to distinguish from one who has been smothered, and a child who has been thrown or intentionally dropped may have injuries similar to those of one who died from an accidental fall.

A team of experts carefully examined the fatalities of children ages 0 to 4 that occurred from 1983 through 1986 in the State of Missouri. Using multiple information sources, the team found that the true extent of child deaths that could be considered homicides was largely underestimated. FBI homicide data for Missouri had included only 39 percent of the fatalities that "definitely" resulted from maltreatment and 18 percent of fatalities that "possibly or definitely" resulted from maltreatment (Ewigman, Kivlahan, and Land, 1993). Some analysts have estimated the

[5] The decrease for Hispanics is based on data from three States only, as noted earlier. Homicides of Hispanic teenagers peaked in these States in 1995 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997).

[6] The authors use age 5 as the cutoff for defining a "young child" because lifestyle changes occur when universal school enrollment begins (usually at age 6).

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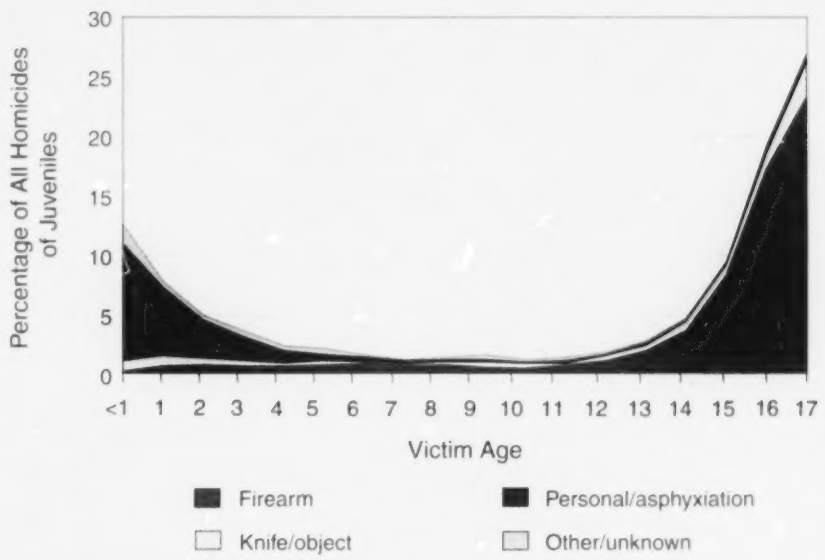
actual rate of homicides for young children to be double the official rate (U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1995).

Homicides of young children rose 38 percent between 1984 and 1993 (figure 4). After remaining elevated for a number of years, the number of such homicides declined in 1997 (dropping about 16 percent from 1996). Much of the earlier increase was among children ages 0 to 1 and may have been an artifact of classification. Because of the difficulty of confirming homicide in the deaths of very young children, many States established child death review teams in the 1980s. The greater scrutiny by such teams may have elevated official child homicide rates without any true underlying increase in the incidence of child homicides. In addition, more than 23 States in recent years have adopted "homicide by abuse" statutes that make it easier for prosecutors to charge offenders with homicide in child abuse cases—even without proof of intent to kill. This statutory change also could have produced some "artifactual" increase in the rates at which children are murdered.

Two characteristics that particularly distinguish the homicides of young children from those of other juvenile victims are that homicides of young children are committed primarily by family members (71 percent) (figure 8) and by the common (68 percent) use of "personal weapons" (i.e., hands and feet) to batter, strangle, or suffocate victims (figure 7) (see footnote 4, page 4). Also, young girls and young boys are victims of homicide in about equal proportions (46 percent and 54 percent, respectively), and although male perpetrators somewhat outnumber female perpetrators (58 percent and 42 percent, respectively) in homicides of young children, females are involved in these homicides more often than in homicides of victims of any other age (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997).

Young children at the highest risk of homicide are those under age 1 (figure 5). Homicides of children in this group include a certain number of infanticides (homicides in which recently born children are killed by relatives who do not want the child, are ill equipped to care for the child, or are suffering from a childbirth-related psychiatric disturbance) (Resnick, 1970). FBI homicide data do not identify infanticides as a distinct subgroup. Countries such as Britain and Canada, by contrast,

Figure 7: Juvenile Victim Homicides, by Weapon Used and Victim Age Group, 1997

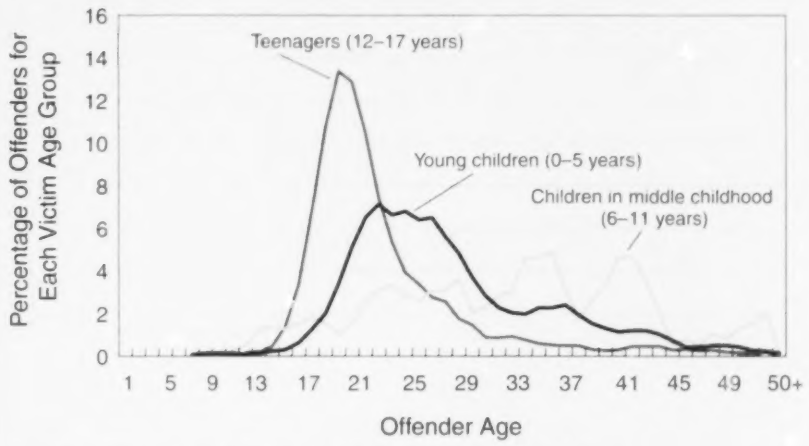


Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997.

Figure 8: Juvenile Victim Homicide Rates, by Victim-Offender Relationship and Victim Age, 1997

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997.

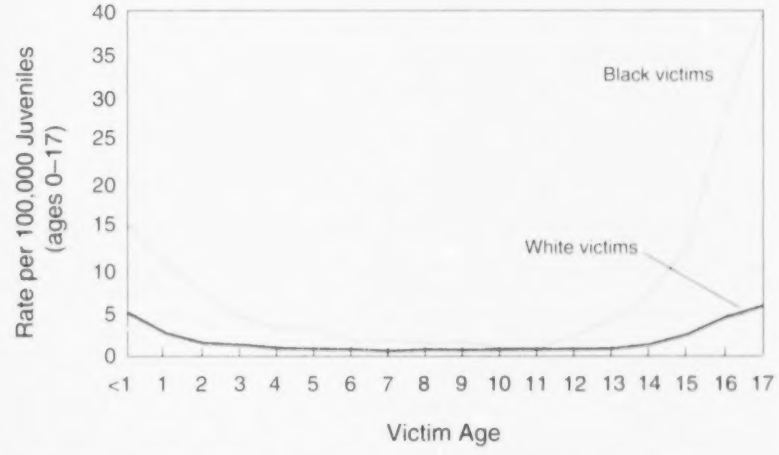
Figure 9: Offender Age in Juvenile Victim Homicides, by Victim Age Group, 1997



Note: This figure presents 3-year running averages of victim age groups.

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997.

Figure 10: Juvenile Victim Homicide Rates, by Victim Race and Age, 1997



Note: Homicide rates were calculated by the Crimes against Children Research Center.

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997.

have a special infanticide offense category, and one Canadian study indicated that 60 percent of homicides of children under 6 months old qualified as infanticide (Silverman and Kennedy, 1988). In the United States, FBI data do identify victims murdered during the first 6 days of life (victims of what is sometimes called neonaticide), and in 1997, there were about 70 such victims (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997). Two-thirds were murdered by mothers, one-half of whom were under age 20. Fathers were responsible for about 1 out of 10 of these murders. The number of children murdered during the first 6 days of life remained stable throughout the 1990s.

Children in Middle Childhood

Middle childhood, ages 6 to 11, seems to be a time when children are relatively immune from the risk of homicide. Although children in this age group can face substantial violence, in the form of both parental assaults at home and peer aggression in their school and neighborhood, relatively little of it is lethal. The overall homicide rate of 0.6 per 100,000 for children in middle childhood is far lower than that for juveniles of any other age group (figure 5). The rate during this period is even low for children in population subgroups, such as African Americans, that have high overall juvenile homicide rates. The homicide rate for children in middle childhood is lower than that for any other segment of the population, including the elderly. (The murder rate is 2.2 per 100,000 for those 65 and older.)

The homicide rate is probably low for children in middle childhood because this period is a time of transition. Children ages 6 to 11 have outgrown some of the characteristics that make very young children vulnerable to lethal force, but they have not begun to engage in the activities that drive up the homicide rate for adolescents. Thus, children in middle childhood are less dependent and require less continual care than very young children. They are also more self-sufficient and possess a degree of socialization and verbal skills that younger children do not possess. These qualities make children in middle childhood less of a burden and less potentially frustrating for their parents and other adult caregivers, who are the primary perpetrators of early childhood homicide. Children in middle childhood are also bigger and better able to hide from, dodge the blows of, and get away from angry parents than young children. It takes more force and energy to inflict a lethal injury on a child age 6 to 11 than on a younger child. By the same token, children in middle childhood are protected from some of the dangers that affect adolescents. They are usually under adult supervision and protection, and most have not yet gained access to weapons, drugs, and cars. Gang activity, while starting for some, has not yet become highly dangerous. Children in middle childhood are also less likely than adolescents to be considered threats or viewed as candidates for involvement in crime by criminally minded adults or youth.

Children in middle childhood, however, do get murdered. Their deaths appear to

result from a mixture of causes, some related to the causes of homicides in early childhood and some to the causes of homicides of adolescents. Because they are still more physically and emotionally dependent than teenagers, children of middle childhood (like young children) are killed most often by family members (61 percent of the perpetrators) (figure 8) (see footnote 4, page 4). Unlike cases involving young children, however, these homicides are not committed primarily by hand (figure 7). Approximately one-half (49 percent) are committed with firearms. Moreover, reflecting their greater independence, children in middle childhood begin to fall victim to homicides by strangers. One out of eight homicide victims in this age group is killed by a stranger, more than three times the proportion for younger children. Children in middle childhood, especially the older ones, also begin to experience the ravages of gang-related violence. Of all homicides of children ages 6 to 11 for which police listed a circumstance, 6 percent were listed as gang related. Those who kill children in middle childhood are the oldest of all child killers, with more than half (52 percent) older than age 30 (figure 9).

Homicides of children in middle childhood also appear to stem from a variety of other motives. For example, children of this age are at risk of sexual homicides. Some sex offenders are attracted to children in this age range and sometimes murder children to hide their crimes. A significant number of homicides of children ages 6 to 11 are negligent gun homicides, in which youth and/or other family members wield or misuse firearms that they believe to be harmless or unloaded. Children in middle childhood are also killed in the course of crimes such as robberies or carjackings, in which children are unintended victims. Family members sometimes murder children of this age in the course of arson attacks or whole-family suicide-homicides. The diversity of homicides of children of this age group makes them difficult to typify.

It is notable that homicides of children in middle childhood did not show the same consistently upward trend as other homicides of juveniles in the late 1980s and early 1990s (figure 4). Most of the variations in their rates were only slight fluctuations in a relatively low base rate of homicides. The lack of a consistent trend for homicides of children in middle childhood is additional evidence that homicides during this developmental period may be a distinct phenomenon.

Types of Juvenile Homicide Victimizations

In addition to categorizing homicides of juveniles by the age of the victim, researchers often group such homicides by features of the crime context and by perpetrator. The following sections describe certain distinguishing characteristics of these types of homicide.

Maltreatment Homicides

Child maltreatment homicides are committed by persons charged with the care of a child, including parents and other family members, babysitters, and friends who have taken responsibility for the child. In 1997, FBI data showed that 27 percent of all child victims of homicide (more than 500 children) were killed by a parent, stepparent, or other adult family member. Other data reported by child protection authorities showed 1,196 child maltreatment fatalities in 1997 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 1999). This difference reflects the fact that many studies that report data on child maltreatment fatalities (e.g., Ewigman, Kivlahan, and Land 1993; U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1995) include deaths other than those officially recorded as homicides, particularly deaths caused by neglect or negligence. (Deaths caused by neglect generally include situations in which a child dies because parents or caretakers failed to provide food or obviously needed medical attention. Deaths caused by negligence, by contrast, involve parents or caretakers who fail to provide basic supervision or precaution and a child who dies in a clearly preventable accident, such as falling after being left unattended at an open window.) Approximately 42 percent of deaths counted by child protection authorities as child maltreatment fatalities are classified as resulting from neglect or negligence, 54 percent as resulting from abuse, and 5 percent as resulting from abuse and neglect (Wiese and Daro, 1995).

The vast majority of child maltreatment fatalities (92 percent) involve children age 5 or younger. In like fashion, most (70 percent) of the deaths classified as homicides for this age group result from maltreatment (i.e., are committed by family caretakers) (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997). Child maltreatment fatalities most often involve very young children, with 40 percent of victims under age 1, 18 percent between ages 1 and 2, and 13 percent ages 2 or 3 (Wiese and Daro, 1995).

Two factors account for very young children's unusually high risk of death in cases of child maltreatment. First are the considerable demands that children age 5 and younger impose on parents and other caretakers. The complete dependence of very young children (who can be needy, impulsive, and not yet amenable to verbal control) and the constant attention they require can overwhelm some caretakers. In fact, two of the most common triggers of fatal child abuse are crying that will not cease and toileting accidents (U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1995). Second, and perhaps most important, is that children of this age are small and physically vulnerable. Unlike older children, very young children can still be easily picked up, shaken, or thrown. In addition, a limited amount of physical force inflicted on a very young child can cause serious damage, and the immaturity of certain anatomical features (e.g., the relatively large size of the head and weakness of the neck) means that very young children are more likely than older children to suffer fatal traumas as a result of abuse. The significance of this physical vulnerability is reflected in the fact that fatal child abuse is more concentrated among very young children than nonfatal child abuse. The major cause of death in child abuse cases involving very young children is cerebral trauma (U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1995).

Child maltreatment fatalities are more common in conditions of poverty and in families marked by divorce or paternal absence. Child maltreatment fatality rates are also disproportionately high among African Americans (Levine, Freeman, and Compaan, 1994). Drug use is a factor in 29 percent of child maltreatment fatalities. Several studies show that boys and girls are at approximately equal risk of fatal abuse, but boys are at slightly higher risk of fatal neglect (Levine, Freeman, and Compaan, 1994). Young boys, who often are more active and aggressive than girls, are possibly more difficult to supervise or regarded by their parents as needing less care and supervision (Margolin, 1990). It is interesting that male caretakers are responsible for a disproportionate number of child abuse fatalities and female caretakers (who spend more time caring for young children) are responsible for a greater proportion of child neglect fatalities (Levine, Freeman, and Compaan, 1994). Inadequate preparation for assuming a caretaking role with young children may cause men to have lower levels of tolerance for crying, soiling, and disobedience.

Tragically, a significant percentage of child maltreatment fatalities—24 to 45 percent in various studies (Levine, Freeman, and Compaan, 1994; Wiese and Daro, 1995)—occur in families already known to child protective authorities because of some family or childcare problem they had been having. In as many as one in eight child maltreatment fatalities, the case was currently active (Levine, Freeman, and Compaan, 1994). This statistic raises the hope that many child maltreatment deaths could be prevented through proper intervention.

Unfortunately, the more than 1,000 child maltreatment fatalities that occur each year need to be placed in the context of more than 1 million cases of child abuse and neglect substantiated by child welfare authorities every year. Some observers doubt that the subgroup of cases that result in death could ever be reliably detected from the larger pool—in part because fatalities are comparatively rare and in part because so many of the factors that contribute to an actual death are unpredictable (U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1995). Other observers, however, have noted that there is an important subgroup of child maltreatment fatalities that occur in families with a long and serious history of child maltreatment and parental incompetence. These observers believe that better research and more aggressive child welfare intervention might save a substantial number of lives.

Multiple-Victim Family Homicides

One of the grisliest kinds of family homicide occurs when a family member kills multiple kin or even whole families, including children and youth. In 1997, 6 percent of homicides of children and youth (approximately 115) were committed as part of multiple-victim family murders in which a family member killed a juvenile along with other victims (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997). Three-quarters of the juvenile victims in such crimes were under age 12. Victims included approximately equal numbers of boys and girls. In 59 percent of cases, only two family members (two juveniles or one juvenile and one adult) were killed; in 41 percent of cases, three or more family members were killed. In 57 percent of cases, the juvenile victim died along with an adult victim. Fathers and stepfathers were responsible for most multiple-victim family homicides in 1997 (60 percent), and perpetrators tended to use firearms. Compared with typical victims of juvenile homicides, those in multiple-victim family homicides are more likely to be white, but their geographic distribution is not markedly different. Consistent with the general downward trend in juvenile homicide, the number of victims of multiple-victim family homicides has been declining somewhat in recent years, down from a high of 130 in 1993. Studies of special samples of such cases show that they are associated particularly with an offender's separation from an intimate partner and/or mental illness (depression and psychosis, but not personality disorders) (Cooper and Eaves, 1996; Rosenbaum, 1990). Perpetrators commit suicide in as many as 40 percent of these cases.

Homicides by Females

In general, women kill much less frequently than men. However, one-quarter of the victims in killings by women are juveniles. Women are responsible for 43 percent of the deaths of children under age 12 who are killed by identifiable persons, a percentage that has been relatively stable since the 1980s (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997). Women overwhelmingly kill very young children (75 percent of their juvenile victims are under age 6) and members of their family (79 percent). Thus, women who kill are heavily concentrated in child maltreatment homicides and infanticides. Consistent with these types of crimes, women are more likely than men to use their hands and feet as weapons (54 percent versus 22 percent). Women are less likely than men to use a firearm to kill a child (17 percent versus 63 percent). Interestingly, 20 percent of the homicides of children committed by female offenders involve an additional offender, almost always a male accomplice (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997). Women who kill children are more likely to be labeled mentally ill than men who kill children and are somewhat more likely to commit suicide (Silverman and Kennedy, 1988). Researchers also have highlighted differences between young, unmarried females who commit infanticide (often by suffocation or strangulation) and older, married females who beat children to death in child maltreatment homicides (Silverman and Kennedy, 1988).

Homicides by Strangers and Unidentified Offenders

Parents naturally worry about the threat of homicide posed to their children by strangers with malevolent intent. Accurately evaluating the threat posed by strangers is difficult because often the identity of the perpetrator in homicides of juveniles is not known. About 11 percent of those who murder juveniles are officially classified as strangers, but an additional 29 percent are unidentified (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997). Most of the unidentified offenders are generally believed to be strangers (in part because homicides committed by strangers are considered more difficult to solve). Moreover, the distribution of most crime characteristics in cases with unidentified offenders is more similar to that for victims killed by strangers than for those killed by nonstrangers (table 2). Thus, depending on the percentage of unidentified offenders included, somewhere between 11 and 40 percent of homicides of juveniles are committed by strangers.

Homicides of juveniles by strangers and homicides of juveniles by unidentified offenders involve a disproportionate percentage of teenage victims (87 and 81 percent, respectively), male victims (84 and 80 percent), victims killed with firearms (92 and 82 percent), and gang-related circumstances (about a third in both cases). However, compared with teenage victims, the numbers of children under the age of 12 killed by strangers (3 percent) and unidentified offenders (13 percent) are relatively small (see figure 8, page 6, and footnote 4, page 4). Moreover, some of these unidentified offenders are probably family members or acquaintances of young child victims.

Abduction Homicides

Child and youth abductions that end in homicide are another peril that has alarmed large numbers of children and their families in the wake of highly publicized tragedies. Unfortunately, FBI data do not include information on abduction as a homicide circumstance. In 1988, a reanalysis of FBI data suggested that the maximum number of such abduction homicides was 43 to 147 each year (Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1990).

Two large, multiyear, multistate samples of homicide abductions of juveniles have allowed researchers to sketch the characteristics of victims and offenders in this

type of case (Boudreaux, Lord, and Dutra, 1999; Hanfland, Keppel, and Weis, 1997). Although many highly publicized homicide abductions have involved preteen children (such as Adam Walsh), the majority involve teenagers. Teenage girls were found to be at the highest risk, and the motive in more than two-thirds of homicide abduction cases examined in the studies was sexual. Fifty-three percent of the offenders were strangers, and 39 percent were acquaintances. Virtually all offenders were males, and the great majority were under age 30. Eighty-five percent were unmarried or divorced, and 50 percent were unemployed at the time of the crime. In 58 percent of the homicide abductions, offenders made contact with their victim within one-quarter of a mile of the victim's home, and in 54 percent of such cases, the murder occurred within one-quarter of a mile of the site of initial contact (Hanfland, Keppel, and Weis, 1997). Strangulation and stabbing were much more common in these abduction homicides than in other types of murders of juveniles.

Homicides by Youth

A number of high-profile incidents in the 1990s highlighted the problem of youth killing other youth. In 1997, about one-fourth of offenders (of those whose ages were known) in murder cases involving juvenile victims were themselves juveniles (virtually all teenagers). The phenomenon of juveniles killing other juveniles increased dramatically during the 1980s and early 1990s (900 victims in 1994 compared with 400 in 1980) and then declined (about 500 victims in 1997). The predominant pattern in these killings is for teenagers to kill other teens (84 percent of victims in 1997 were teens versus 16 percent preteens) who are acquaintances (68 percent) by using a firearm (74 percent) (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997). A small percentage of the youth who killed other youth in 1997 (7 percent) were teen parents who killed their young children in infanticides or child maltreatment homicides.

School Homicides

The 1999 tragedy in Littleton, CO, brought public attention to the killing of children in schools. Media reports have created the impression that such killings are more commonplace than they actually are. Unfortunately, FBI statistics do not categorize episodes of homicide by place of occurrence. However, statistics on school homicides are available in the *2000 Annual Report on School Safety* (U.S. Departments of Justice and Education, 2000), which describes findings from the School-Associated Violent Deaths Study.

Table 2: Case Characteristics in Homicides of Juveniles Committed by Strangers, Unidentified Offenders, and Identified Nonstrangers

	Type of Offender		
Characteristic	**Stranger (%)**	**Unidentified Offenders (%)**	**Identified Nonstranger (%)**
Victim Age Group	100	100	100
0–5 years	7	14	47
6–11 years	6	5	10
12–17 years	87	81	43
Victim Sex	100	100	100
Male	84	80	63
Female	16	20	37
Victim Race	100	100	100
White	50	33	54
Black	44	62	41
Native American	1	0	2
Asian American/ Pacific Islander	5	5	3
Weapon	100	100	100
Firearm	92	82	44
Knife/object	6	7	12
Personal/asphyxiation	2	5	36
Other/unknown	0	6	8
Circumstance	100	100	100
Sex offense	1	1	2
Robbery	15	9	2
Drug violation	1	8	3
Gang killing	36	32	9
Other	47	50	84

Note: Data was gathered from 1,790 homicides, including 189 (11%) committed by strangers, 515 (29%) committed by unidentified offenders, and 1,086 (60%) committed by identified nonstrangers.

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997

The School-Associated Violent Deaths Study, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, indicates that less than 1 percent of the children nationwide who were murdered in the first half of the 1998–99 school year (July 1, 1998, to December 31, 1998) were victims of school-associated murders (i.e., murders that occurred on school property, at a school-sponsored event, or on the way to or from school or a school-sponsored event). The total number of school-associated violent death incidents declined from a high of 49 during the 1995–96 school year to 34 during the complete 1998–99 school year (July 1, 1998, to June 30, 1999). The 34 incidents in the 1998–99 school year resulted in 50 school-associated violent deaths (students and nonstudents), of which 38 were homicides, 9 were suicides, 2 were killings of adults by a law enforcement officer in the course of duty, and 1 was an unintentional shooting. Since the 1992–93 school year, there has been at least one multiple-victim school homicide event each year except for the 1993–94 school year; the number declined from six events in 1997–98 to two in 1998–99.

Available data do not suggest that schools are particularly risky places for homicide victimization, nor do they show that schools are becoming increasingly risky. Rather, it seems that a rash of multiple-victim school homicides occurred from 1997 to 1999, of which the Littleton episode was one. The numbers, however, are too small to be labeled a trend.

Prevention Initiatives

In recent years, concern about homicides of juveniles has prompted a number of policy initiatives, many of which have been targeted at preventing youth from killing other youth. Such efforts include laws that criminalize firearm possession by minors, call for prosecution of minors as adults in criminal court, or hold adults responsible when minors gain access to firearms. OJJDP-sponsored programs include the Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders; the Comprehensive Gang Model; victim-offender mediation; conflict resolution training; and the Partnerships To Reduce Juvenile Gun Violence program. These coordinated community initiatives seek to control gang activity, stop the flow of guns to juveniles, improve supervision of delinquent youth, counsel victims of violence, and teach alternatives to violence. A specific example of such an initiative is the Partnerships To Reduce Juvenile Gun Violence site in Oakland, CA, a major component of which is a program called Caught in the Crossfire. This hospital-based intervention provides bedside counseling to juvenile victims of gun violence to prevent future retaliation by the victim or the victim's friends and family members. Many of these victims and their family members are known to be involved with guns and are referred to the partnership's intervention programs. Similar coordinated community programs have been credited with reducing the rate at which teens were murdered in other places, such as Boston, MA (Kennedy, 1998). More information on these initiatives and other OJJDP programs is available on the OJJDP Web site at www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org.

Other initiatives have focused on the homicides of younger children. Child death review teams (consisting of experts with medical, social services, or law enforcement backgrounds) have been established in almost all States to review suspicious deaths of children, identify possible homicides, and make recommendations for prevention. Statutes have been crafted to facilitate the prosecution of child maltreatment deaths as homicides, removing the need to prove intent to kill. Child abandonment laws, sometimes called "Baby Moses" statutes, have also been passed in a number of States to prevent newborn abandonment and infanticide by allowing for voluntary, anonymous relinquishment of unwanted infants (Sneeringer, 2000). Mandatory minimum sentencing has been enacted in some States to deter homicides and confine more of those who commit them. In an effort to prevent child deaths, law enforcement agencies in some jurisdictions have established protocols for providing a more rapid response to child abductions. In some States, child protection investigations provide for greater police involvement or are turned over to law enforcement authorities to improve safety and protect children in high-risk situations (Wilson, Vincent, and Lake, 1996).

Preventing homicides of children and youth continues to be an active item on the policy agenda of national, State, and local authorities. However, not all policy initiatives reflect the complex and varied nature of the problem, as illustrated in information presented in this Bulletin. The extent and complexity of the problem and the fact that the juvenile homicide rate in the United States continues to be substantially higher than in other modern democracies suggest that much remains to be done.

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This Bulletin was prepared under grant number 98–JN–FX–0012 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice.

Points of view or opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of OJJDP or the U.S. Department of Justice.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

Acknowledgments

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